

Village-based Tourism as a Form of Community Development

Abstract: This article discusses the work of the Tourism Destination Management Outreach Group of Urban Environmental Management Project in village-based tourism which was carried out in collaboration with the Agency for Coordinating Mekong Tourism Activities (AMTA). It introduces the concept of village-based tourism, looks at its policy implications largely from a national perspective and examines a set of case studies to provide a context for a discussion of challenges, instruments, potential solutions and issues in developing village-based tourism. Experience has demonstrated that if properly managed, village-based tourism can directly influence poverty alleviation by generating income opportunities for communities, increases employment opportunities, improves villagers' access to new markets by providing infrastructure improvements (especially roads) and enhances communities' self-reliance by providing help in areas such as packaging for agricultural products being sold to tourists, setting up marketing co-operatives and providing marketing information. The article concludes with an action plan developed to introduce village-based tourism into the Greater Mekong Sub-Region.

Key Words: Sustainable tourism planning, village-based tourism, community development, visualization, community based tourism planning, marketing.

Introduction

This article examines the concept of village-based tourism which is emerging as an important form of tourism in many developing economies in Asia. It is clear that village-based tourism, if properly managed, can help to contribute to the economic well-being of those living in disadvantaged communities. However, it is important that this new form of tourism be planned and managed in a sustainable fashion if it is not to negatively impact residents and their environment. The article is based on work carried out by the Tourism Destination Management Outreach Group of Urban Environmental Management Project at the Asian Institute of Technology and funded by the Canadian International Development Agency and the Agency for Coordinating Mekong Tourism Activities (AMTA)¹. Village-based tourism had been identified as one of the directions to be explored in a study funded by the Asian Development Bank for the Great Mekong Subregion (GMS).

The article introduces the concept of village-based tourism, looks at its policy implications largely from a national perspective, examines a set of case studies which were designed to provide a variety of dimensions of village-based tourism and concludes with an action plan developed to introduce village-based tourism into the Greater Mekong Sub-Region.

Experience has demonstrated that if properly managed, village-based tourism can directly influence poverty alleviation by:

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- generating income opportunities for communities through formal employment, the sale of local products and services and/or profits from locally-owned enterprises or community co-operatives
- increasing employment opportunities from tourism activities
- increasing villagers' access to new markets by providing infrastructure improvements (especially roads)
- enhancing communities' self-reliance by providing help in areas such as packaging for agricultural products being sold to tourists, setting up marketing co-operatives and providing marketing information

In addition, if village-based tourism increases incomes and improves the quality of life in villages, it may reduce the migration of poor/young people to urban areas and help relieve the urban poverty problem.

Village-Based Tourism

Village-based tourism should not be seen as just another product to be added to a country's inventory of tourism attractions. The overall goal of village-based tourism should be to reduce poverty and increase the quality of life of village residents. Given the fragility of villages governments should carefully review tourism development plans and implement policies and guidelines to protect villagers. Given the potential for negative consequences to tourism in a small community setting, negative impacts should be carefully considered in terms of how they affect villagers, their cultural traditions and lifestyles and the product itself which can be altered or destroyed by inappropriate tourism activities.

To support sustainable tourism development at the village level, a variety of policies, adapted to local conditions, should be considered by national tourism organizations. Figure 1 illustrates the essential elements of an overall national village-based tourism policy. Each element is explored below.

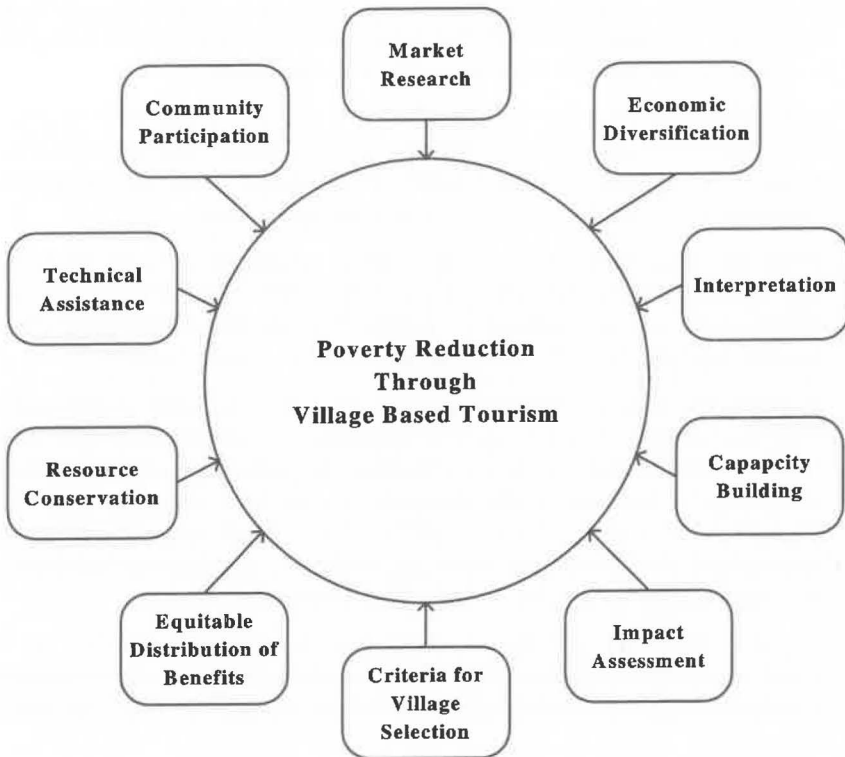


Figure 1: Essential Policy Dimensions for Village-Based Tourism

Elements of an Overall National Village-Based Tourism Policy

- **Market Research:** Community participation must be seen as a key element in developing tourism for smaller communities. The participation process must be supported by effective education programs to ensure local communities understand the impact of tourism and agree on the level and type of changes they want. There should never be tourism development without the full support of community members.

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- Village selection: Village selection must be based on effective market research given that product development and promotion techniques must consider market realities. Village-based tourism initiatives require co-coordinated marketing and promotion efforts; many small villages do not have the resources to successfully market products on their own.

Communities must often be part of a circuit or regional tourism strategy which includes effective marketing initiatives by national and/or provincial tourism authorities. A co-operative environment allows villages to realize the benefits of working together rather than competing with each other.

- Economic diversification: National tourism organizations need to ensure that communities do not develop a strategy which positions tourism as a community's only income source. Rather, communities can be shown how tourism can help diversify and complement their economic base.
- Interpretation: Residents need help to learn how to tell their community's story to visitors and how to include historical and cultural accuracy in all interpretation initiatives. In some cases, a community's traditional values, traditions and lifestyles can be interpreted through the use of strategically-placed information/interpretive centers. These small centers can support tourism initiatives in several communities thereby eliminating the need for each community to develop an individual interpretive strategy².
- Capacity building: NTOs must develop the skills/knowledge of all government officials involved in village-based tourism to protect the fragile nature of villages and create effective product development and marketing initiatives.
- Village selection: Not every village is a suitable candidate for tourism development. National tourism organizations, in co-operation with other ministries and departments, must develop criteria for selecting villages which should receive government assistance and possibly financial support from aid agencies. The criteria should consider: the ability of the community to absorb tourism without harming cultural and social systems, location, the nature and uniqueness of tourism resources and the support of villagers. The application of these guidelines may be difficult politically but essential to preserving communities and ensuring the success of village-based tourism strategies.
- Equitable distribution of benefits: All attempts must be made to ensure village tourism initiatives provide benefits for the entire community. Individual initiatives should not be implemented if they negatively impact the community as a whole. National tourism organizations and other government ministries and departments must assist communities to develop

co-operative mechanisms for product development and sharing the benefits of tourism development.

- **Resource conservation:** Ecological and cultural resources, which form the basis for most village-based tourism products and experiences, are an essential component of any tourism policy. This management process requires that a village's carrying capacity be assessed, prior to tourism development, to determine whether it has the resources to absorb tourism. Environmental, cultural, social and economic impacts must always be evaluated to ensure tourism development balances environmental, cultural resources conservation and economic development objectives.
- **Technical assistance:** Villages need to be self reliant but have to recognize there are certain activities beyond their capacities and resources. To meet local and national needs, villages require technical assistance, provision of infrastructure, development of community leadership skills and

visitor management plans. A visitor plan considers what should be protected and/or shared with a visitor and how to manage a visitor's experience.

A problem always exists in village-based tourism when the actual product is a traditional way of life. Villages must be helped to develop management plans to ensure a community maintains its tourism product and allows for a community's natural evolution. This can be difficult. There will be times when the process of change, based on new values and lifestyles, will alter a community's character to such a degree that it no longer has any tourism value. This can occur when communities are subjected to a barrage of media influences. Under no circumstances should an NTO attempt to halt a community's evolution.

Illustrative Examples of Village-Based Tourism

Successful village-based tourism policies must ensure that local communities have access to tourism development opportunities which preserve their area's cultural and social identity and the natural environment. The following are examples of effective village-based tourism projects which portray sustainable tourism approaches.

Khiriwongse Village – Nakhon si Thammarat Province, Thailand

This village has been inhabited for more than 200 years, is known for its natural beauty and is surrounded by mountains and near an area with streams, waterfalls and a tiny island.

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Figure 2: Natural Attraction at Khiriwongse

Following a flood disaster, associations such as the Keep Khao Luang Green Fund were founded to help local people maintain and preserve natural resources and the environment. The Khiriwongse Village Ecotourism Club, established to handle tourism activities and offer trekking along the nature trails to the top of Khao Luang, formed a committee of community representatives.

Club committees include local people elected annually by villagers. Local officials, such as the headman and sub-district officials, serve on a tourism advisory board providing advice and support. The Ecotourism Club has 160 members involved in ecotourism and home stay programs. Residents can become members by paying a registration fee of 20 Baht/50 cents and can

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qualify for home stay and other kinds of services, guiding for visitors interested in trekking, if approved by the club committee. Members get paid the full amount for the services they provide to tourists without any deduction from the club.

Currently, Khiriwong Village hosts Thai and international visitors. Two main tourism activities are offered:

- Visitors can trek along the natural trails on the nearby Khao Luang Mountain. Since the top of the peninsular range is covered with virgin forest trekking is limited, for the first six months of the year, to allow for forest recovery. With the support of private and governmental sectors, the community determines how many tourists can be accommodated based on the site's carrying capacity and facilities.

A well-trained team of local people acts as tourist guides, porters and security guards to ensure travelers do not pick plants, trees and orchids. A portion of the fees paid by tourists goes to the local community and the remainder is donated to the Tambol Administrative Council and the Khao Luang Green Fund. Plastic bags, cans and bottles are carried down the mountain and sustainably disposed of in order to preserve Khao Luang National Park. It is becoming increasingly apparent that given the increasing number of visitors who come to Khiriwong to trek on their own it is difficult for club members to monitor activities in the park and to minimize negative impacts.

- Visitors can experience community life by staying with ecotourism club members for up to three days in a home stay situation. Villagers provide informal orientation, of village life, places to visit and expected behavior. Visitors can pick fruit in the orchard, make natural dyes using local cloth and materials and plant trees at the foot of the mountain.

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Figure 3: Traditional Life Style from Homestay Program, Khiriwonge Village

This case is interesting and noteworthy given:

- The trust that local people have in the Ecotourism Club which has developed a transparent working process to ensure tourism activities benefit the whole village.
- Club members keep all income generated from tourism activities; while the club does not deduct a percentage thereby encouraging local participation.

Krung Ching – Nakhon si Thammarat Province, Thailand

Krung Ching, located in the southern part of Thailand, comprises ten villages with a population of 7,000, has abundant natural resources including waterfalls, hills and caves where 90% of the visitors are Thai nationals.

Major tourism activities include:

- Trekking along a nature trail to the beautiful Krung Ching waterfall which is 3.8 kilometers in length

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- Rafting on the Khlong Klai in boats provided by Krung Ching Administration Office
- Exploring the Hong Cave which has a stream running through its center.



Figure 4: Tourism Activities in Krung Ching

The local government administrative council, Sub-District Administration Organization of Krung Ching, implements tourism activities and is responsible for protecting natural resources, promoting the area and providing appropriate tourist facilities and training for local people.

The Organization initiated rafting which employs residents as rafters and guides. The Krung Ching sub-district provides training and supplies rafts and other accessories. Residents, who work on rubber and fruit plantations, have an opportunity to earn additional income and learn how to preserve their area's natural resources.

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Krung Ching villagers established a local eco-tourism network (two volunteers from each village with an elected leader) to conduct studies prior to introducing tourism activities in the area. They are responsible for gathering information about tourism sites, capacity, tourism readiness and local feedback. Tourism revenue is distributed directly to local people who work as rafters, guides or cooks. Other proceeds go to the local eco-tourism network group for other tourism projects.

This project is successful given:

- The support received from local governmental organizations. The training provided by governments increases residents' skills and knowledge and creates increased awareness of the benefits of environmental preservation.
- Local residents are involved in the tourism planning process. This is essential since it creates a strong commitment to the implementation process.
- The excellent co-operation between local government and the eco-tourism network group.

Klong Khwang Village – Nakhonratchasima Province, Thailand

Klong Khwang Village is located in the northeast region of Thailand and is about thirty minutes by car west of Korat, the province's capital city. It has 130 households, led by a headman elected by the community, with an economy based on agriculture, rice being the main crop.

In 1998, Klong Khwang developed a community-based tourism plan that helped to increase with the technical assistance from an international organization in increasing community awareness and encouraging local participation in the community planning process. Techniques used included: regular meetings with key actors, use of visualization techniques to let residents see beforehand what revisions might look like, a series of focus group discussions/interviews to allow community input in the direction of tourism development and guidelines for decision-making and a full-scale simulated "mock tourism day" to give villagers the opportunity to host tourists, experience tourism/resident issues and determine how well the village was able to cope with carrying capacity and infrastructure concerns.

The plan was created by the community. For example, no home stay programs or guesthouses were developed because the community felt that this would have negative social and cultural impacts. Instead the community decided to develop agricultural products and souvenirs for tourists - using local raw materials. To acquire the appropriate skills to develop and market these goods, the community obtained assistance from the provincial Office of Skill Development.

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The Klong Khwang Co-operative, formed to manage these activities, has the following objectives:

- generate additional tourism income for villagers
- reduce the number of unemployed people
- promote Klong Khwang village and local goods made from agricultural products

Villagers are encouraged to join the co-operative, buy shares and receive annual dividends. A portion of the profits go to the saving co-operative which provides loans to co-op members and helps with medical expenses or funeral ceremonies.



Figure 5: Community Cooperative Activities

Currently tourism development in Klong Khwang proceeds on a small scale (as planned). Tourists can visit and pay their respects to the Reclining Buddha and Stone Wheel of Thamma, take part in community activities and purchase

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local products. The community hosts 70-80 visitors, mainly Thais, on weekdays and 200 on weekends. Most spend 1-2 hours at the village, causing minimal impact to the environment and community. Lunch is provided, upon request, by the women's group of Klong Khwang.

Klong Khwang has been recognized by the APEC Tourism Working Group and the provincial government as a good example of a community-based development initiative. The village headman regularly shares the community's experiences with people from other areas.

Important dimensions of this case study include:

- Members are allowed to think independently about a variety of issues. It is not driven by political forces.
- The community has ownership of the plan and is committed to its ongoing success.
- The community took the time to develop the necessary skills and knowledge to implement the plan and, over time, learned to appreciate the importance of sustainable approaches to community development.
- Effective leadership is crucial. This process would not have worked without the dedication and ability of the headman. His vision and commitment to improve his community was and is an important ingredient.

Sample Action Plan for Village-Based Tourism

Based on the concept of village-based tourism developed earlier in the article and the cases discussed above, the Urban Environmental Management Project developed an action plan for implementing village tourism in the GMS countries including Cambodia, Yunan Province of China, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam. Elements of the plan are presented here as an illustration of an approach that can be adopted by other countries or regions. The overall approach is found in Figure 6.

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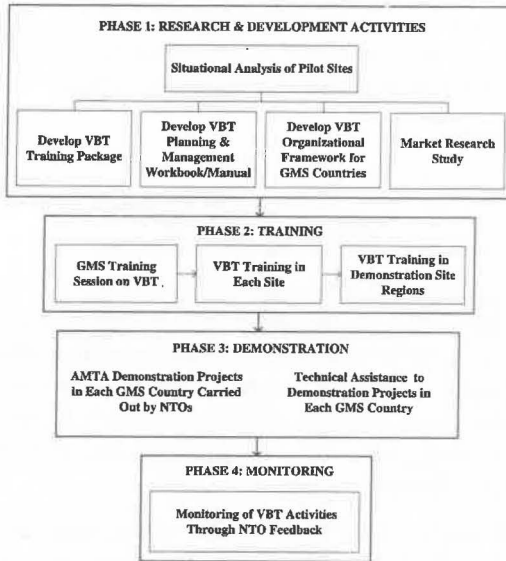


Figure 6: Proposed Action Plan

PHASE 1: POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

This phase has a variety of research and development activities.

- A situational analysis must be carried out to assess the overall situation of a village, tourism potential, evaluate its carrying capacity and determine public opinion as it relates to tourism development. This will help stakeholders to determine if tourism is appropriate for a village to develop.
- The development of organizational and management frameworks for sustainable VBT for GMS countries that would guide tourism development in smaller communities.
- The development of a workbook on village-based tourism that would provide a practical tool for tourism officials and other governmental decision-makers. The workbook would provide officials with practical information on village-based tourism development and management.
- A detailed market research project should be undertaken to identify international and domestic markets for village-based tourism on a region-

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wide and country basis. The study could also identify characteristics of potential visitors and the nature of visitor expectations. The study would form an essential part of the technical assistance for communities and national governments in developing village-based tourism plans.

PHASE 2: TRAINING

Training courses should be delivered as part of the action plan process. The workbook described above could become an essential course material component. The courses could include the following:

- A course could be delivered at the regional level where key decision-makers would be provided with an opportunity to better understand village-based tourism. The course would help participants in selecting villages for tourism development, prepare processes for monitoring tourism development and set up appropriate organizational and management structures. Part of the course would be designed to provide participants with skills to deliver material in national level seminars and courses.
- A national level course could be delivered to key national and provincial level staff based on the regional level training course described above. It is recommended this course take place in a village situation to allow participants to directly apply skills and knowledge gained from the course.
- A local level course should be delivered. The course should be offered in the region where a pilot site is located and demonstration activities will take place. While the regional and national level courses may follow a more traditional training model, it is recommended a community-based approach be used for local level officials, village leaders and community members.

PHASE 3: DEMONSTRATIONS

Once development work has occurred and training has been delivered, a demonstration program should be carried out in each of the pilot sites. The object is to develop a detailed sustainable village-based tourism management plan. This provides national, provincial and local officials with the opportunity to better understanding the village-based tourism development process. One objective is to assist the pilot site in furthering its tourism potential. It is equally important to use the process to refine village-based tourism policies and procedures in each of the member economies.

To ensure the ongoing process of developing village-based tourism policies, each of the pilot sites should have access to technical assistance from the research team. The team should also monitor the planning and management process/results to provide feedback to national governments and other organizations.

PHASE 4: MONITORING

Tourism organizations at national and local level should work with the villages in developing criteria to evaluate the overall process of implementing village-based tourism initiatives in a region. Based on feedback from the monitoring process, a village-based tourism model can be developed ensuring the model reflects the needs of stakeholders.

Conclusion

This article discussed village-based tourism as a way of starting a debate on how the advantages and disadvantage of this form of tourism can be dealt with in a sustainable manner. The authors look forward to working with others who are looking at both the conceptual and practice oriented dimensions of using tourism as an important tool for poverty reduction in smaller communities.

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FOOTNOTES

- ¹ This activity is further discussed in "Recommended Policies for Village Base Tourism Development in the GMS Countries" and "Recommendations for Sustainable Village Tourism Development in the Greater Mekong Subregion". 1999-2002.

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